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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to ascertain what difference if any there is in viewer reaction to television news shows done in a traditional way as contrasted with news done in a chatty "happy talk" manner. It was hypothesized that happy talk viewers should feel significantly more entertained, happier, less depressed, less concerned, less pessimistic, consider the problems covered in the newscast to be less serious, recall fewer items, and rate the newscaster significantly higher than traditional format viewers. The 116 university students who were subjects were randomly assigned to two groups, one to watch a traditional format news show, the other to watch a happy talk format, and were given a questionnaire following the viewing that included demographic information, a semantic differential scale for each newscaster, a scale to determine emotional response to the newscast and to several of the individual stories, a news fact quiz, and an informed citizen quiz. It was found that the happy talk viewers considered themselves to be happier than traditional format viewers and they showed significantly less favorable audience reaction for the male newscaster in the happy talk format. (TJ)

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THE IMPACT OF FORMATS ON PUBLIC REACTIONS TO TELEVISION NEWS: HAPPY TALK VS. TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM

The subject of local news formats has been a hotly debated topic since the arrival several years ago of the "Eyewitness News" format and its counterpart, "Happy Talk." This study was formulated to investigate the effects of happy talk news formats on the audience's recall and attitude toward the newscasters and news events.

Eyewitness News is a term used to signify live on-the-spot coverage of news events by reporters. Its outgrowth -- happy talk -- describes the newsless conversation that occurs between newscasters.[1] Such chatter is designed to develop a specific on-the-air personality to heighten audience appeal. Happy talk began as a loosening of the traditional news presentation based on the belief that audiences preferred a more friendly and relaxed news atmosphere. Soon, however, newscasters began filling valuable air time with less clever jokes and remarks until newsless chatter remained.[2]

News consultants have generally been credited with the innovation of happy talk formats. Sophisticated audience testing, including the use of galvanic skin response tests, has been used by such consultants to justify recommendations to change from experienced news journalists to attractive personalities as news anchors.[3]

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A 1976 study showed that, contrary to the belief of many news consultants, audiences do not overly concern themselves with the newscaster and his personality. Audiences in this study chose local on-the-spot eyewitness news coverage to be the most important criteria in the selection of a news show. Newscasters were sixth on the scale, preceeded by a direct and straightforward news presentation, a relaxed and informal news atmosphere, and the weather report.[4] Another study showed that when audiences did look at a newscaster, they chose voice and speech, followed by professional characteristics, as their primary concern. Later they looked at personal appeal and appearance.[5] Still another study listed the important characteristics for a newscaster in this order: knowledgeable, experienced, conviction, unbiased, honest and trustworthy, factual reporting, easily understood language, and dedication to informing, followed by a smooth and sophisticated manner.[6]

Proponents of happy talk point to the ratings and results of news consultants' surveys to illustrate audience appeal. They also argue that happy talk and traditional formats differ only in form, not in content and substance. News consultant Frank Magid believes that audiences are demanding the changes: "As the news advances and becomes more sophisticated, the audience demand changes and increases the need for new formats, new presentations, methods and content."[7]

Critics of this approach accuse happy talk formats of robbing journalistic content and expertise from the news and replacing it with a glamorous veneer. These critics are concerned with the lack of quality information flow to the public and with how that lack affects the public's right to know.

A survey of newscasts from three network stations in New York, two traditional and one Eyewitness News format, discovered a significant difference between formats not only in form, but also in content. The Eyewitness News format contained one-third more violent stories, twice as many human interest stories, and averaged two and one-half times as many humorous stories as the traditional format. Each of these elements shows a tendency toward entertainment in the news. Surprisingly, the Eyewitness News format contained more hard news (perhaps due to less time per story), more feature stories, and less interaction time between on-the-air personalities. However, the station which devoted more air time to newscaster interaction talked of news being presented, while Eyewitness News personalities spent their air time happy talking.[8]

However important the personality of a newscaster is to the ratings or the public, questions come to mind: What effect does the personality race inherent in the happy talk format have on the audience? Will the struggle to become more "personable and friendly" by inserting newsless chatter into a newscast affect the quality or seriousness of the news as viewed by the public?

Solutions to the questions were attempted through the analysis of audience reaction to a five-minute newscast presented in two ways: with a traditionally journalistic style and with a happy talk format. Hypothesized differences in response were:

H_1 After viewing, the happy talk viewers should feel significantly more entertained, happier, less depressed, less concerned, and less pessimistic than traditional format viewers.

H_2 After viewing, the happy talk viewers should consider the problems covered in the newscast to be significantly less serious than straight format viewers.

H_3 After viewing, happy talk viewers should recall fewer news items than traditional format viewers.

H_4 Happy talk viewers should rate the newscasters significantly higher than traditional format viewers.

METHODS

Two newscasts of approximately five minutes duration were designed. Each format contained identical stories and were presented by the same newscasters in both formats. To elimate any bias and to as closely as possible emulate current broadcasting standards, a male and female newscaster were employed. News in the traditional format was presented in a straightforward journalistic manner with no interaction between newscasters. The happy talk format encouraged a more light-hearted manner and joking interaction by newscasters between news segments and before each commercial break.

Each format opened with a standard news logo and voice over announcing the station's call number. Newscasters were placed at a standard news set; care was taken to insure that camera angle, lighting, position and length of shot, and the rate of delivery of news stories were as equivalent as possible. The script consisted of ten stories: the first three were delivered by the male newscaster, the next two by the female newscaster, followed by a one minute commercial break. Two more stories were presented by the male newscaster, with the last three being presented by the female, followed by another half-minute commercial break. Great care was taken to choose stories that were not dated but that followed current affairs.

Examples of stories selected were: an automobile accident, a fire in a nursing home, tax rebates, the state of the economy, the AFL-CIO, and a local kidney drive. A film clip and over-the-shoulder visuals were used in six of the ten stories.

Both the male and female newscaster engaged in approximately the same amount of happy talk. In addition, they presented the same stories in both formats. Several stories were selected to be "test" cases, in which no change occurred -- each newscaster presented the story in an identical manner in both formats with no happy talk interaction.

Newscasts were shown to a total of 116 University of Oklahoma students who were told only that they would be viewing a taped show. Students were randomly assigned to the two groups. Each group answered an identical questionnaire immediately following the viewing.

The questionnaire included demographic information, a semantic differential scale for each newscaster, and a scale to determine emotional response to the entire newscast and to several of the stories. A news fact quiz and an informed citizen quiz were also included.

RESULTS

Feelings after Viewing the Newscasts

To test the feelings of the subjects after viewing the newscasts, subjects were asked to indicate on a scale of one to five (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) how they felt in terms of five emotions, entertained, happy, concerned, pessimistic, and depressed. Happy talk viewers did consider themselves significantly happier than

traditional format viewers. They did not, however, feel more entertained, nor were their feelings significantly different from traditional format viewers on any of the other reaction items. These results are shown in Table 1. Although most of the remaining items show absolute mean score differences in the predicted direction, the relationships are not strong enough to substantiate the hypothesis.

Table 1 about here

Perceived Seriousness of Problems

The effect of happy talk interaction upon the perceived seriousness of news was tested by having subjects rate the problems in certain stories on a five-point scale from very serious to not at all serious. The hypothesis that viewers of the happy talk format would consider the newscast problems as less serious was not statistically supported; however, results were in the predicted direction. In all but three of the tested elements, happy talk viewers appeared to consider the stories as less serious than their traditional format counterparts.

Content of the stories revealed another interesting reaction by viewers. Happy talk viewers leaned toward considering tax rebates and obscene words as more serious than disasters such as fires, the economy, and traffic accidents, although these differences were not statistically significant as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Recall of News Items

In testing total recall of the stories, subjects were asked to openly recall as many of the stories from the newscast as possible. The story on black market babies was the only item recalled significantly more often by the happy talk viewers. However, subject recall on each of the other stories where happy talk occurred was in the predicted direction -- i. e., viewers did more accurately recall those stories that contained happy talk. In the stories which did not include happy talk, traditional viewers had better recall, although the results were not significantly significant. Table 3 summarizes these results.

Table 3 about here

Ratings of Newscasters

The most startling results occurred in the audience's attitude toward the male and female newscasters, as tested by audience reaction on a 12 scale, 7-point, semantic differential. The overall mean for both newscasters were lower for the happy talk format than for the traditional format. The overall mean score for the male newscaster showed significantly less favorable audience reaction for the happy talk format. The female newscaster was generally evaluated less highly than the male in both the happy talk and traditional formats. This difference could be credited to the difference in news presentation between the male and female. The female was less experienced in news presentation than the male. Table 4 summarizes the ratings for both commentators in each format.

Table 4 about here

The supposition that happy talk viewers would consider the newscasters as more friendly than the traditional format viewers was substantiated for both male and female newscasters. However, perceived competency of both newscasters, particularly the male, suffered in the happy talk format. The male newscaster received a comptency rating of 5.31 in the straight format, which was significantly higher than his rating of 4.39 in the happy talk format. The male newscaster was considered by the happy talk viewers to be significantly less believable, dependable, intelligent, good, serious, and qualified than the traditional format viewers reported. The female newscaster was also considered less qualified, less honest and less serious by the happy talk audience. Happy talk viewers also found the male newscaster significantly more biased.

DISCUSSION

This limited study confirmed that viewers feel "happier" after viewing happy talk news compared to straight, traditional news. They do not, however, feel more entertained. Perhaps the nature of an experimental setting limited the potential to isolate this latter variable. Extension of the study to some kind of field-experimental setting might prove fruitful.

This tendency to feel happier may be related to the finding that happy talk viewers seemed to perceive some problems as less serious than did traditional format viewers. Although the differences in this portion of the study were not statistically significant, many

are in a direction which indicates less concern by the viewers about problems such as fire, traffic accidents and black market baby sales. This area needs further exploration as it may be difficult to isolate effects in a single study. If future studies indicate a further trend in this direction, the long term implications of reduced public concern about important social problems as a result of happy talk viewing could have serious consequences.

The fear that happy talk viewers will be less informed than straight format viewers appears to be unfounded. Happy talk viewers seem to recall as many, sometimes more, items than do their counterparts.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of the study was the differential perceptions of the newscasters. Since one of the hallmarks of the happy talk format has been the emphasis on newscaster personality, it is surprising that the same newscasters are viewed less positively in the happy talk format. Only in terms of friendliness did newscasters in the happy talk format come out ahead while they suffered in varying degrees in terms of qualified, serious, competent, intelligent, and other seemingly important characteristics. A particularly troublesome finding was that newscasters seem to appear more biased in the happy talk format. Television newscasters pride themselves on possessing the opposite quality.

Further studies might explore the relative importance of these characteristics to viewers of various formats. Perhaps some viewers actually value friendliness more than competence and seriousness, although this would not be consistent with previous research on desirable newscaster characteristics reported earlier.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Local Television's Best Foot Forward," Broadcasting, January 5, 1976, 87.

2. Ibid.

3. David Chagall, "Only as Good as His Skin Tests," TV Guide, 25:6-10 (March 26, 1977).

4. "News: the 'New Messiah' for Local TV as Content Gains Ground Over Form," Broadcasting, August 23, 1976, 46-58.

5. Hershel Shosteck, "Factors Influencing Appeal of TV News Personalities," Journal of Broadcasting, 18: 63-71, (Winter, 1973-1974).

6. William L. Cathcart, "Viewer Needs and Desires in Television Newscasters," Journal of Broadcasting, 14: 55-62, (Winter, 1969-1970).

7. "Local Television's Best Foot Forward," p. 82.

8. Joseph R. Dominick, Alan Wurtzel and Guy Lometti, "Television Journalism vs. Show Business: A Content Analysis of Eyewitness News," Journalism Quarterly, 52: 213-18, (Summer, 1975).

9. Robert Bower, Television and the Public, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973), 100.

Table 1

Feelings After Viewing

mean scores:	Straight	Happy	t-value	prob.
Entertained	2.66	2.63	.16	.44
Pessimistic	2.88	2.98	-.62	.27
Happy	2.47	2.80	-1.88	.03
Concerned	3.47	3.33	.71	.24
Depressed	2.90	2.63	1.44	.08

Table 2

Perceived Seriousness of Selected Story Problems

Mean scores:	Straight	Happy	t-value	prob.
Fire	3.80	3.39	1.45	.08
Economy	4.51	4.39	.91	.18
Black Market	3.71	3.43	1.48	.07
Kidney Disease	3.93	4.00	-.40	.35
Obscene Words	2.44	2.54	-.43	.34
Traffic Accidents	4.13	3.95	1.10	.14
Tax Rebates	3.61	3.64	-.19	.43

Table 3

Recall of Particular Stories

Stories	Unaided Mentions	
	Straight (N = 59)	Happy (N = 56)
Fire	54 (91.5%)	49 (87.5%)
Tax Rebate	39 (66.1%)	36 (64.3%)
Economy	13 (22.0%)	17 (30.4%)
Car Energy Tax	10 (16.9%)	13 (23.2%)
Traffic Accident	33 (55.9%)	32 (57.1%)
Black Market Babies*	19 (32.2%)	33 (58.9%)
Obscene Words	6 (10.2%)	8 (14.3%)
Kidney Drive	22 (37.3%)	18 (32.1%)
Consumer Leasing Act	8 (13.6%)	3 (5.4%)
AFL-CIO	27 (45.8%)	20 (35.7%)
Windshield Wipers	18 (30.5%)	26 (46.4%)

*Chi square = 7.24 (P<.01)

Table 4

Commentators Ratings

	Female		Male	
	Straight	Happy	Straight	Happy
Overall Mean	4.52	4.29	4.99	4.47*
Qualified	4.17	3.52*	5.02	4.11*
Honest	5.19	4.84*	5.14	5.30
Poised	3.17	3.29	5.00	4.52
Biased	4.61	4.32	4.83	3.95*
Intelligent	4.73	4.38	5.15	4.48*
Good	4.02	3.73	4.68	4.18*
Friendly	4.66	5.23*	4.14	5.14*
Serious	5.12	4.39*	5.64	3.70*
Attractive	4.36	4.25	4.42	4.23
Believable	4.92	4.71	5.39	4.95*
Dependable	4.92	4.89	5.11	4.71*
Competent	4.44	3.98	5.31	4.39*

* t-test indicates significant difference at .05 between happy and straight.